

Observations of butterflies in remote parts of the Scottish Highlands

My main interest is hill walking, and I have a particular fondness for Scotland. I walk frequently in very remote parts of the Highlands, which are not often visited even by very keen walkers. I have, for example, climbed not only the 284 3,000 foot peaks known as Munros, but the 227 subsidiary peaks above 3,000 feet as well. Only 399 people are known to have done this since records began in 1901, completions of the lists being registered with the Scottish Mountaineering Club.

I have been interested in butterflies for many years now, and a couple of years ago joined the Butterfly Conservation Society. However, I must stress that I am very much an amateur, and so a different weight must be placed on my observations than would be given to, say, one of the editors of the *Millennium Atlas*.

But my observations may nevertheless be of value, in that they are from areas which are especially remote and difficult of access.

I have two general impressions of the distribution of butterflies in the Highlands:

- many of the kilometre squares in the Highlands in the *Atlas* are blank, indicating no record exists. My view is that this is because in many of these squares there *are* no butterflies, rather than that there are but the area has simply not been visited by a recorder because of its remoteness
- despite this, I believe that species are more widespread in their distributions than is generally believed

The weather in Scotland can of course be dire, even at the height of summer. On several occasions in July I have been in heavy snowstorms on the tops. But there is the occasional magnificent day of sunshine. Even on such days, the striking feature of long walks over many hours through remote areas is how few butterflies are actually seen. This is particularly the case not only on the high tops, but in the boggy, low-lying glens which make up much of the rest of the landscape. It is possible to walk for literally hours without seeing a single butterfly.

However, there is the occasional surprise. Here are three records, in increasing order of implausibility as far as current records and wisdom on distributions of species is concerned.

Mountain Ringlet *E. epiphron*

The weather on 29 June 2003 was superb. I set off from the ski centre in the forest North of Ben Nevis and the Aonachs at grid reference NN 173775. I went on tracks through the forest and climbed Aonach Mor by its remote North East ridge. I went from there over Carn Mor Dearg and then climbed Ben Nevis via the Carn Mor Dearg arête, an easy scramble rather than pure walk. My descent was to the car parking at the road head of Glen Nevis via the summit of Carn Dearg South West at NN 155701, descending from there into the Coire Eoghainn and down into the glen.

This descent route from the Ben is very rarely used, being continuously steep over much rough, pathless terrain. It should only be attempted by experienced walkers, and indeed there is a notice board in Glen Nevis which proclaims "Danger. This is not a route to Ben Nevis".

I saw some Small Whites along the initial forest tracks, and then no butterflies at all until I was about to descend out of the Coire Eoghainn at around 6 pm on a sunny evening. The corrie is grassy and south-facing, and at approximately NN 165702 at an altitude of some 650 metres I saw a Mountain Ringlet. I understand that this is the first report of the species on Ben Nevis since 1984 (private communication from Butterfly Conservation). I should mention that I have seen Scotch Argus on several occasions, sometimes in considerable numbers, so I believe I am able to distinguish the two species.

Chequered Skipper *C. palaemon*

I believe that the distribution of this butterfly is considerably wider than is currently recognised, although the *Millenium Atlas* does mention in the discussion on this species the problems of obtaining records in remote areas in weather which is often inclement.

On 28 May 2002, the weather was overcast but bright. I walked to and from some remote Munros above Loch Monar, in the west of Scotland but much further north than the accepted range of *C. palaemon*. I imagine that the only people who visit this area are serious Munro baggers, along with the occasional forestry or estate worker. Both on the way out and the way back, I saw some six to eight butterflies which, I thought at the time, must be Chequered Skippers. On inspecting the *Millennium Atlas* on my return home I could not see how I could have confused them with any other species. The specific location is on a track going east/south east then south from Craig (NH 040493) on the A890. The butterflies were in the area from roughly where the track leaves the forest (NH 066487) to where it turns almost due east (NH 075468 – on the map just to the left of 'Pollan Buidhe'). The track is near but above the Allt a'Chonais stream, and the surrounding ground is moor-like rather than boggy.

I believe I have also seen this butterfly in the long, remote glens in the Cairngorms, in the east of Scotland. The terrain is similar to that described in the above paragraph. More specifically, the locations are in the upper parts of Glen Derry as it runs north to south bounded by Derry Cairngorm to the west and Beinn Breac and Beinn Chaorainn to the east, and in the long approach from the North to Braeriach on leaving the Rothiemurchus forest.

White Letter Hairstreak *S. w-album*

Many of my walks are done solo, but on this occasion I had a companion. This turned out to be fortunate. Indeed, even with a witness I have only felt able to mention this because of a fortuitous meeting with Roger Dennis, who has been very encouraging. My fear was that it would be regarded as so implausible as to remove all credibility from any future reports I made.

At the end of May 2003, we were at the Linn of Dee, which is about six miles west of Braemar and is the road head for excursions into the Southern Cairngorms. On the road was a single but perfect wing of a White Letter Hairstreak. My companion at the time is not into butterflies, but I picked it off the

road and took it back to where we were staying in Braemar and we both checked it on the Internet. There is no doubt that it was and, as I say, I have a witness! One possibility of course is that it was hit by a car in a completely different location, and just happened to fall off there.

On a final point, I have been willing for some time to submit negative records to Butterfly Conservation. In other words, details of walks in remote areas in favourable conditions in which no butterflies are seen at all. These seem to me to be useful in helping to differentiate kilometre squares in which there really are no butterflies, and squares in which there are, but which are very remote and have not been visited by a recorder. Unfortunately, I have not received an encouraging response to this suggestion.— PAUL ORMEROD, 35 The Avenue, Kew, Richmond, Surrey TW9 2AL (Email: pormerod@volterra.co.uk).

The editor invited Butterfly Conservation to comment on the above article and their response is reproduced below

We do recognise that negative records can be very important in assessing the status of species. Indeed negative counts are quite acceptable as part of butterfly monitoring transects. However, the difficulty with butterfly distribution recording is that there is no standard methodology and it is consequently extremely difficult to make assumptions about negative records. One recorder's visit to a site might be very different from another's in terms of the time they spend searching, their observational skills, the areas that they search, whether they look for immature stages as well as adults and how well they know the ecology of the species concerned. Timing will also be critical depending upon the flight period of the species in question. Then of course there is the weather. I visited a large number of known Pearl-bordered Fritillary *Boloria euphrosyne* colonies in Scotland in early June 2004, as part of a national survey for this UK Biodiversity Action Plan Priority Species. All but one of the sites were negative for the species. However, I cannot conclude very much from this. Perhaps the species had finished early, there were certainly some Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary *B. selene* around, and this butterfly is usually a little later than my target species. Also the weather was overcast and cool during all visits. I saw other butterflies at most of the sites, including the previously mentioned Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries, but I cannot assume that the conditions were therefore also suitable for my target species; perhaps they were all roosting. Finally, there is the spatial element. Although fritillaries are quite large and obvious, I might simply have missed the main flight areas whilst searching hectares of shoulder-deep bracken hillsides. This factor was brought home to me when, after walking over several kilometres of apparently suitable but unoccupied habitat for other specialist butterflies, including Chequered Skipper *Carterocephalus palaemon* and Green Hairstreak *Callophrys rubi*, I stumbled on a small patch of bluebells, no bigger than a kitchen table, upon which four Chequered Skipper and 21 Green Hairstreak were perching and nectaring. Had I not seen this tiny patch of ground, I might have concluded that the area was devoid of butterflies too.